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Murder Will Out

Cynicism, mendacity, secrecy: Those are the watchwords of the Reagan Administration underworld. Only a specialist could keep up with all the details that are pouring out now, the plotting and the knavery. But the essence is clear.

It goes back to the obsession with Nicaragua. When Congress forbade military aid to the contras, President Reagan did not accept that judgment. He signaled his Administration to proceed by other means.

Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, had the bright idea of cadging money for the contras from the Sultan of Brunei. Secretary of State Shultz approved — an indelible blot on the record of a principled man. The Sultan said yes last summer, and several million of his dollars went into a Swiss bank account run by Lieut. Col. Oliver North of the White House staff.

All kinds of money was begged and browbeaten around the world. And then there was the problem of arranging for delivery of weapons to the contras in the teeth of the Congressional

prohibition. For that a supposedly private network, closely linked to the Reagan Administration, was set up.

To get the flavor of the business, think about an outfit called Stanford Technology International Trading Group Inc. It was created by an Iranian arms dealer, Albert Hakim, now a U.S. citizen.

Stanford's president is retired Air Force Gen. Richard V. Secord, a specialist in covert operations. He and Mr. Hakim were introduced in the 1970's by Edwin P. Wilson, the former C.I.A. contract employee who is now serving a long prison term for his secret dealings with Libya and Colonel Qaddafi.

General Secord's fingerprints are all over the contra arms transfers. A Stanford employee, retired Air Force Col. Robert C. Dutton, handled the logistics of the secret supply operation. Another friend of General Secord's, Thomas Chines, a former C.I.A. agent, hired the pilots.

Flights to the contras went from Ilopango, a Salvadoran air base dominated by U.S. military advisers. The senior adviser, Col. James Steele, closely monitored the clandestine operations.

Then it turned out that the same planes were being used for "humanitarian" aid that Congress authorized and for weapons drops. When asked about that, Assistant Secretary Abrams said there was nothing wrong with it because the State Department was not paying for the leg of the flight taking weapons to the contras from Ilopango. The money for that was coming from other sources — e.g., presumably, the Sultan of Brunei.

"If we contract an airplane and crew," Mr. Abrams said, "it does not make us responsible for other work they may do while in Central America."

Exactly. Or as Tom Lehrer put it:

*"Once the rockets are up,
Who cares where they come down?
It's not my department,"
Says Wernher von Braun.*

The American people care: that's who. Once again an Administration has discovered that there is a deep feeling about the law in this country. Cynicism and mendacity about the requirements of law will not be tolerated.

Many supporters of President Reagan are deeply unhappy about the lawless means used in this business. Linda Chavez, who worked on his White House staff, put it in a sentence when she said "Oliver North was no conservative."

But many conservatives are still resisting the essential truth of Contragate. It was not just the means that went wrong but the end: using covert, violent means to overthrow a Government that we do not like.

"There is no necessary connection between covert sleaze and the contras' cause," an editorial in The New Republic argued. But there is. That is why the Reagan Administration created the whole contra war in secret from the beginning: because it knew the American people would not accept the use of terrorism for political ends.

Other people have no such qualms. Not just the Russians but, say, the French shrug at illegalities committed in the interest of the state. Americans do not. It may be inconvenient, but it is a fact: If an American government cannot justify a policy to its own people when it resorts to secrecy and lawlessness instead, the policy will not work.

The essence of Contragate is clear

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